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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an interdisciplinary 9-unit course at Pasadena (California) City College, entitled the "American Cultures Block Program." The block is divided into three distinct sections: (1) "United States History from 1865 to the Present"; (2) "Humanities Through the Arts"; and (3) "Introduction to Literature," a hybrid literature and composition course. The goal of the course is to show the connections among history, literature, music, and the arts, and the connections and common ground of the experiences of the diverse cultural groups in the United States. Specific topics and texts are explored, along with concerns related to the course composition. (EH)

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THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION: AMERICAN PLURALISM

American Pluralism and the Short Story:
An Interdisciplinary Approach
or
Sui Sin Far, Silko, Cisneros, and Miss Sasagawara Teach American History

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presented by

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November 10, 1995

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I have a confession to make. When I received the letter of acceptance of my proposal to present at CCHA, I was delighted. However, as soon as my delight registered, so did my terror as I thought, "Oh my god, what did I propose?" In a panic I looked through my desk drawer, ransacked my computer files (which are not labeled in any organized manner), and then, after calming down, discovered my three paragraph proposal on top of my desk.

Then I saw my very impressive title and really panicked. Let me see, "Sui Sin Far, Silko, Cisneros, and Miss Sasagawara Teach American History." Obviously, a title only a perverse English teacher could devise -- that wonderfully forced alliteration. But what did it mean (besides the fact that I had to leave out Zora Neale Hurston because her name didn't flow)? Imagine my terror when I saw this same sibilant title printed for perpetuity in the conference program. CCHA really expected me to follow through. But the truth is, my work does indeed go beyond a fanciful title.

Four years ago (although it feels like four-score), I along with two other colleagues at Pasadena City College began teaching the American Cultures Block Program, an interdisciplinary, 9-unit course composed of three distinct sections: United States History from 1865 to the present, Humanities Through the Arts, and Introduction to Literature, a hybrid lit and comp course. The goal of the course is to show students the connections among history, literature, music, and the arts and, perhaps more importantly, the connections and common ground of the experiences of the diverse cultural groups in America.

However, using the history as our starting point and framework, we realized that we could not teach history as a series of chronological events; instead we chose to look at America as a mosaic and consider how the different cultures make up what it means to be an American. We actually start the course the first day with the question "What is an American" or "What is American," eliciting a wide array of responses from a very diverse student population, a population that is 34% Hispanic, 30% Asian, 23% white, 8% black, 4% Filipino and nearly 1% Native American. Responses range from apple

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pie, baseball and football to films, the flag, and the Statue of Liberty. We then spend the semester endeavoring to discover who has come to America and who we are through the history of immigrant and non-immigrant groups. In the literature we read about what it means to come to America (or be in America) and have one's basic cultural beliefs challenged and see what that challenge does to oneself and one's children. Our hope is that in addition to having an intellectual and academic perspective of what it means to be an American, students will also engage in a personal exploration of what that means to them.

The historian Ronald Takaki wrote, "As Americans, we originally came from many different shores, and our diversity has been at the center of the making of America. While our stories contain the memories of different communities, together they inscribe a larger narrative." (*A Different Mirror).*

This larger narrative is explored as students are introduced to themes that cross cultural borders: the American dream, arriving in America, assimilation, discrimination and racism, education and opportunity, generations, traditions, language, women's issues. As we read the literature, we keep returning to these themes and seeing in what ways diverse cultures hold them in common and in what ways they differ.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) recently published a paper entitled *American Pluralism and the College Curriculum.* The paper states, "Those who live here want, with few exceptions, to participate in the life and possibility of United States society. We want more than the elucidation of our differences. Implicitly, if not explicitly, most want this country to live up to the implied promise of its democratic heritage; to provide in experience as well as in principle equal dignity, communality, opportunity and justice. We continue to grapple as a people both with the implications of that wish and with the complexities and pain of our mingled histories." With this in mind, my students look at our differing histories, our points of connection, and try to understand our diversity in relation to the nations' democratic aspirations and values.

Just last month I attended the Ford Foundation Fifth Annual College Diversity Initiative Conference in Philadelphia. In his keynote speech Jack Noonan, president of Bloomfield College, noted that "our cultural perspective affects what we define as reality." That statement resonated within me as I thought of the verdict in the OJ trial, wondering how history had affected that jury's controversial decision just the previous afternoon. I also thought of the stories that we tell, the stories that we read, and how we and our students can begin to comprehend the different realities that exist within our diverse society. The Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko has written, "You don't have anything if you don't have the stories." And another Native American writer, N. Scott Momaday, wrote, "The possibilities of storytelling are precisely those of understanding the human experience." It is in the stories that we learn who we are and how we got here. History, is after all, a story and what we know depends on who is telling the story and that person's perspective of reality.

We also know that students need to examine problems from multiple perspectives. In the American Cultures Block, this examination process is fostered as students look at American history as it has been experienced by people of different cultures and read the literature of the different cultures as it develops out of those experiences. The course includes writings by Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and European Americans.

Okay, let's get to the nuts and bolts of the class. To begin with, this is a continually evolving course. Our premise is that while Dr. Ellen Shockro is teaching about the Cherokee Trail of Tears and Dr. Harry Smallenburg is taking the class to the Southwestern Museum to look at Native American art, I will be leading discussions of Zitkala Sa's "School Days of an Indian Girl" and Leslie Marmon Silko's "Lullaby." While the history class learns of the Chinese Exclusion Act, we read Sui Sin Far's poignant tale "In the Land of the Free" and consider what that freedom entails. While the humanities class listens to cd's of early blues, my class discusses James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," and the history class discusses the Civil Rights movement. I'm sure you get the idea. We try to keep parallel. It doesn't always work. I also am responsible for introducing students to the different literary genres, so we read and analyze poetry, drama, and long fiction. Obviously, our plates are very full during the semester.

Rather than just offer you a list of works that work (which I have printed up for those interested), I think it will be more effective if I give you some examples of in-class activities that have been successful. Had we more time, I would do them with you, but I'll just be explaining them now.

One of my favorite classes is in the very beginning of the semester when I am concerned that the students have an understanding of what literature is and what it does for us in terms of conveying human experience. Students are given three handouts. The first is a copy of President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 establishing the internment camps in WW II. We examine that, discuss the historical significance, the legal language. We then look at the second handout, two articles from the *New York Times* in 1942 describing reactions to the order and Japanese people as they arrive at the camps, the so-called pioneers. A rosy picture is indeed painted by the journalists. Finally, we look at Dwight Okita's poem "In Response to Executive Order 9066" in which the speaker, a 14-year-old girl, wonders why her best friend will no longer talk to her and laments why she must go to a place where the tomatoes she likes to plant will not grow. Now I realize this is not a short story, but we begin with the poem because it so clearly illuminates for the students that there is indeed a connection between literature and history. It's also something that can be done within the timeframe of the class; a short story would need to be read in advance and we would lose the spontaneity of student response. We may examine the poem for its form and structure, but initially students are moved by the language. Thus an historical event takes shape and meaning for them in a different way. They also can see very clearly how effective literature is in conveying human emotions in contrast to other forms of writing.

Later in the semester when we read Hisaye Yamamoto's "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara"a story of the internment camps the students have already begun to conceptualize their ideas about the camps. We can then discuss both in English and history what it means to live in a democracy that interns its own people.

And this leads to one of the more difficult aspects of the course: the tendency towards relating our United States history as negative. If you have read Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror* you know that historically the dominant American culture has not welcomed any immigrant group, whether Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican, Chinese, or any other. We know about the Trail of Tears, the Middle Passage, the history of racism in our country. But students need to confront the contradictions of our history; they must question how the West was settled at the expense of entire cultures; question a country which deprives its native inhabitants of their land, their language, their customs (as we read in "Lullaby"); question how a democracy can intern its Japanese citizens while sending young Japanese American men to fight for this country (as John Okada writes in "No No Boy"); question how we can be the land of the free while at the same time we close our borders to immigrants and even to infants as we read in "In the Land of the Free." Even now, the powers in this city, the capital of the land of the free, are working to eliminate financial aid for college education for legal immigrants, which will again close borders to opportunity. How do we and our students square this with our democratic ideals, our belief in America as a land of opportunity and freedom? As we read the stories, we are looking at the borders and boundaries in American culture, both literal and figurative.

However, the stories of America not only chronicle the experiences of oppression in our history and the difficulties which ensue from crossing borders, but also the triumphs of individual will. It is important for the students to recognize this.

Thus while we read the internal thoughts of the migrant workers in Tomas Rivera's "And the Earth Did Not Devour Him" and discuss the bracero program and Prop 187 in California, we also read about Cleofilas, the woman in Sandra Cisneros' "Woman Hollering Creek" who joyfully takes her destiny into her own hands as she crosses back over the border and leaves an abusive husband behind. Students strive to understand that Cleofilas crosses not only physical borders between Mexico and the United States but the border from feminine oppression to a degree of liberation.

Let me give you some more examples of the stories. One of my favorites and one that is particularly successful in the classroom is Hisaye Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables." For those of you who are unfamiliar with it, it is a tale of two generations: a Japanese mother brought to America as a picture bride and her adolescent daughter being raised in the tomato fields of California. The mother, Mrs. Hayashi writes haiku, hence the 17 syllables. Her daughter, Rosie, does not understand her mother's language or poetic aspirations. She is busy being sexually awakened by Jesus, the Mexican American field hand. But the mother has a secret, one that is 17 years old and is waiting to be told. The two generations of Issei and Nisei women are separated by cultural and language barriers. In studying the story, students discover the generational differences that exist for all cultures and may be particularly acute for immigrant

cultures as the children of immigrants are raised in an American culture. And many of my students can personally relate to these issues.

Another story, one of the first we read each semester, is Leslie Marmon Silko's "Lullaby." While we analyze the story for setting and symbolism, we also see how the story could only have developed given the history of Native Americans following European settlement in America. The loss of language, the loss of native arts, the dividing of families told in the story stem from the history, which the students are learning about in the history class at the same time.

I ask my students: could these stories have been written given a different history? I ask my students: could Zora Neale Hurston have written "Sweat" given a different history for African Americans? Could James Baldwin have written "Sonny's Blues" given a different history? Do the students see the connection? You bet they do. And not only do they connect the stories to the histories, but they connect their own cultural experiences to other cultures; they see the intersecting lines, the parallel lines, and the divergent lines.

I don't know if any of you have ever had the privilege of meeting or hearing Lee Knefelkamp, a professor of higher education at Teachers College of Columbia University. Lee is one of the funniest and most inspirational speakers I have ever heard at an academic conference or anywhere for that matter. At the Ford Foundation Conference Lee said, teaching is the art of connecting our past with our present and our future. When she said that, I went, "Aha! The American Cultures Block! That's what we do! Now, how can I work that quote into my presentation in Washington?" And so I have. In the block program we read stories to make connections, we look at the relationship between individuals and their past, and we look at the dilemma of the individual or group caught between two worlds and perhaps seeking to resolve that dilemma through the stories.

When I wrote my initial proposal to CCHA (the one that I couldn't remember), I mentioned that my work has been greatly influenced by my participation in the American Commitments Project, Diversity, Democracy and Liberal Learning, sponsored by NEH and the AACU. This is true. The American Cultures Block Program (also funded initially by NEH) began before the American Commitments Project, but one has influenced the other as my commitment to educate students for citizenship and success in a diverse democracy has been deepened.

I would like to end by quoting once again, or actually, thrice again, from the AACU paper *American Pluralism and the College Curriculum.*. It just says it better than I and more succinctly and without alliteration:

> The authors state,
>
> Because our students are part of a society which is pluralistic and multicultural, they need courses that introduce them to comparative, relational studies. No undergraduate can be expected to know well all the world traditions that now mingle together in United States communities. But each can be expected to know several major United States cultural and racial histories analytically, comparatively,

experientially. Each can be expected to develop the capacities to engage the complexity of competing truths.

AND THESE COMPETING TRUTHS ARE SEEN IN THE STORIES

And further AAC&U states,

Because our graduates are part of a society in which ethnic divisions and racial inequities are endemic, they need studies which cultivate understanding of the sources of these divisions....

AND THIS UNDERSTANDING GROWS AS THEY STUDY THE HISTORIES

And finally

Because this society depends ultimately on dialogue and deliberation as primary strategies for resolving difference and determining justice, students need extensive opportunities not just to know different communities, cultures, experiences, and aspirations in United States society, but to engage in conversations that explore the differences, connections, and possibilities among human experience and aspiration across our communities.

I believe that in my literature class in the American Cultures Block, by reading the stories students do indeed explore the differences, engage in conversations, and ultimately see the connections and possibilities for human experience and aspiration in the diverse cultures that we call America.

Source: Association of American Colleges and Universities. *American Pluralism and the College Curriculum, Higher Education in a Diverse Democracy.* Washington: AAC&U, 1995.

"WORKS THAT WORK"
A BIBLIOGRAPHY TO SHOW CONNECTIONS

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